

Barry McGee's show at the ICA examines graffiti and beyond

By Peter Cocchia | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 04, 2013

On a recent night at the Institute of Contemporary Art, a security guard ventured into an upstairs showroom only to find someone positioned on the upper rungs of a ladder. At first the guard panicked, thinking the shadowy figure might be an intruder, before realizing that it was an automaton — a prop in an exhibition opening to the public Saturday.

The artist who designed the prop is Barry McGee. An integral member of the Mission School of San Francisco during the early '90s — an urban movement led by so-called street artists — McGee began his career as a graffitist and has made it a point to subvert artistic expectations ever since.

For a provocateur, McGee, 46, is rather conservatively put together. Pausing to talk at the ICA during the installation of his first-ever mid-career survey, he wears a navy V-neck sweater over a powdery button-down, and his hair, though unevenly shorn, is swept carefully



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Barry McGee at the Institute of Contemporary Art this week, working on his mid-career exhibit that opens April 6. "Everything that Barry's been making in the last 10 years or so is slow, and precise," says ICA curator Jenelle Porter.

to the side.

“I really like to distance myself from all that graffiti stuff right now,” McGee says, with his hands held tightly around a teacup. Admittedly, this is an ironic claim, given that the ICA exhibition is rife with graffiti art.

Seated beside him is Jenelle Porter, the ICA’s Mannion Family Senior Curator.

“I think that one of the trickiest things for an artist is when a museum invites you to make a survey,” Porter says. “It’s really hard to say yes, because that means you’re going to spend a couple of years thinking about all the stuff that you used to make that you don’t anymore. Basically McGee has to think about and reinstall these works that are 15 and 20 years old.”

The artists from whom he draws inspiration now are also very different than they were before: “I’m really into California art from the ’60s,” McGee says, almost in a whisper, gazing off toward the harbor. “I like a lot of Bay Area artists, like Nathan Oliveira, and Bruce Conner. I would never have been into these guys before — but seeing their stuff now. . . . Also, Conner stretched across all these different genres, like photo, drawing, painting, film — and he was involved in all these different scenes.”

This is McGee being modest; the ICA’s 20-year chronological survey of his oeuvre features more than 30 pieces, including installations, paintings, drawings, and photographs.

He is most excited about the exhibition’s end point: a room in which varicolored surfboards pile aslant against the wall, and a number of vitrines, occupied by artwork of friends and family members, stand, museum-like, in the middle.

“There’s work by some artists from Boston,” he says of the vitrines’ contents, “like Ryan Murphy and Josh Brenner and Jesse Littlefield. The last room is about inclusion. . . . These people, I knew from Boston in the early ’90s. Some of them I haven’t talked to for 10 years, but what they’ve done still resonates outward.”

That he wants to include other artists in the exhibition at all is a testament to his collectivist approach. Always, he has been driven by the notion of interdependence within a community, the essence of underground art. Almost everything in the last

room, he says, is a generation-old throwaway — something given him by a friend, or a colleague.

“They end up in my hands,” he explains. “A lot of people will say, ‘Oh, Barry will take that.’ I think that’s how a lot of that stuff starts. It sits in my studio for five or six years, and somehow gets integrated in. On a daily basis, someone is like, ‘Barry, you can use this, right?’ Or there’s like 30 VCRs outside my door.”

His parents’ lifestyle was “pretty stripped down,” he says. “You know, as basic as it gets.”

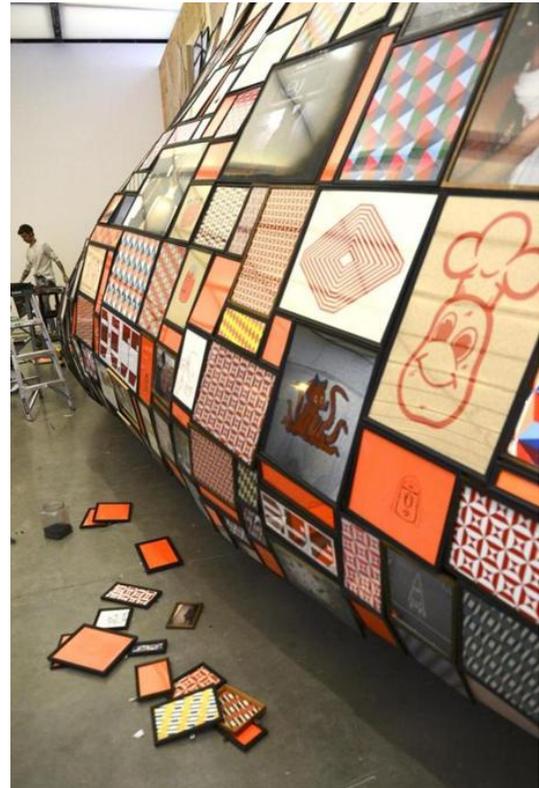
Which might explain why he is so enamored of everyday objects and people. The caricatural faces that crop up in his drawings and paintings belong to the destitute. Many are washed out, with lines like ripples around their eyes, and shaded brown; others, like those painted onto glass bottles, are alternately blue and red — most of them, however, are sorrowful.

Time and again, these faces have cropped up throughout McGee’s career to date, but his overall aesthetic has evolved dramatically.

“Everything that Barry’s been making in the last 10 years or so is slow, and precise,” says curator Porter. “I mean, a lot of it is painting, and geometric.”

“It’s getting linear and looser at the same time,” McGee says, to clarify. “The loose parts are all the dirty, nonsquare things, like the ephemera in the vitrines. And there’s some sculpture-type things up there that are just a lot looser than I’ve ever imagined myself being. But it’s also organized for me, I feel: a painting, and a sculpture, and a drawing. Just very traditional.”

The last room in the show, a sort of “recreation center,” he says, for real people from the community, is a manifestation of his current state of mind. It is notably absent of



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But perhaps there is still a wraith of the old vandal within the artist. Not too long ago, he says, he was painting on a freeway wall when he heard someone approaching; thinking that it might be a cop, he ran away and onto the freeway.

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